

ABSTRACT

THESIS: Reconceptualizing Crisis: An Exploration of the Domestic Crisis Rhetoric Genre across Presidencies

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This thesis examines three case studies in presidential rhetoric in order to explore the genre of domestic crisis rhetoric as defined by Theodore O. Windt (1990). Windt (1986) notes the impressive scholarship on the rhetoric of war and international crises, but also laments the “neglect” of research into “equally significant speeches on domestic ‘crises,’ especially those concerned with economic issues” (p. 104). Windt (1990) proposes a generic model that views domestic crisis rhetoric through a dialectic lens that explores how the discourse defines the president’s policy and how it depicts the policy of the president’s opponents. This study examines three of the most important presidential rhetorical texts on domestic issues of the last 50 years, each by a different president and each addressing a different domestic political issue – Barack Obama’s September 9, 2009 address on health care reform, George W. Bush’s September 19 and September 24, 2008 speeches on the financial crisis, and Lyndon Johnson’s call for a “war on poverty” in his January 8, 1964 State of the Union address – with the goal of testing the generalizability of the genre across time and gaining a better understanding of how presidents respond to – and create – exigency through rhetoric.